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Reagan Goes to the Mat Over Nicaragua

President Reagan in mid-April wiped away some of the secrecy surrounding America's aid to antigovernment guerrillas in Nicaragua, but controversy over his policy continued to grow.

For the first time, the President acknowledged that the U.S. is backing the rebels in Nicaragua. He stressed, though, that his administration is complying fully with the law.

The law in question is the Boland Amendment, Congress's ban against funds "for the purpose" of overthrowing Nicaragua's government.

Representative Edward Boland (D-Mass.), the author, said "evidence is very strong" that the statute is being broken. Several lawmakers fresh from Easter recess trips to Central America stated flatly that violations were taking place. Boland's House Intelligence Committee summoned Secretary of State George Shultz and National Security Adviser William Clark for a round of confidential hearings.

In addition to helping train and arm rebel forces that struck into Nicaragua in recent weeks, the U.S. is blanketing parts of Central America with radar surveillance from sophisticated Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft. The AWACS, flown periodically from a base in Oklahoma, track planes that leave and enter Nicaragua.

Reagan, pressed by reporters about

America's role, said the "completely Marxist" regime of Nicaragua is trying to overthrow the government of El Salvador. The U.S., he said, is "simply trying to interdict the supply lines which are supplying the guerrillas in El Salvador." He added: "We are not doing anything to try and overthrow the Nicaraguan government."

A House subcommittee voted April 12 to cut off the covert aid. But many lawmakers are reluctant to tie Reagan's hands. Some with qualms about secret operations don't want to appear to be helping Nicaragua's government.

Senate GOP leader Howard Baker summed up the mood of many: "I am never going to support an effort ... to subvert the law. But I also won't stand idly by and let Cuba and Russia have a free ride in Central America. It would be disastrous for this country to just roll over and play dead." □

AWACS In Action

